

School-university partnerships: practical propositions in ameliorating teacher education programs for sustainable development

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Abstract

This research study was undertaken to explore school principals' perceptions regarding benefits and challenges in school-university partnership and its role in sustainable development, effect of this partnership on professional development of teacher educators and perceived expectations of pre-service teachers from school- university partnership on their professional practice. It was a qualitative study, using semi-structured interviews from school principals, teacher educators and pre-service teachers. Random sampling technique was used to select sample size from each category not less than 50. Data was analysed using thematic analysis for qualitative research design. Results revealed that school principals and teacher educators agreed fully that administrative support and cooperation is required, whereas pre-service teachers emphasized that such type of partnership will provide enriched experiential learning through teaching practicum. It was concluded that such partnerships, if based upon mutuality and trust will go a long way in ameliorating teacher education programs. This study may prove valuable for schools and universities in developing partnerships practically and may provide an insight to policy makers and educational administrators to develop and implement workable partnerships between schools and universities to integrate theory into practice effectively for sustainable development and improvement in quality of teachers.

Key words: School-university partnership, teacher education program, sustainable development

Introduction

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Educational scenario is changing due to globalization and it's moving towards collaborations and cooperative efforts of educational institutions. Schools and universities have an age old history of partnerships for achieving a wide range of educational goals. Universities required practicum sites for training student teachers and research platforms for educationists. In the recent years, the balance among this has begun to shift in a dramatic way so that schools are acknowledging the need for collaborating with universities for sustainable development. A number of researches on school – university partnerships for enriching teacher education programs have been powerful drivers in this regard. Considerable emphasis has been placed world-wide on collaborations as being the agents for improving teacher education quality (Kruger, Davies & Eckersley 2009). Various attempts provide a comprehensive definition of school-university partnership. A commonly defined statements is: “a collaborative arrangement, deliberately designed between two or more institutions working together for advancement of self-interest and solution of common problems” (Goodlad, 1988). Similar perspective given in more recent era is: “a structured approach in which institutions at different levels plan common approaches for delivering programmes to meet agreed upon targets” (HEA, 2012). Partnerships between schools and universities have been described as most recommended approaches to improvement in teacher education programmes and educational reforms.

Dynamics and nature of school-university partnerships in producing quality teachers

Creation and fostering of school university partnership has been a new trend in educational development for the last two decades or so. A growing consensus has emerged that quality of teaching can be improved if a bridge between theory and practice is established through such partnerships. These days, quality of teaching is seen and measured by an increasing number of key factors and not only on the basis of theory learnt. Universities hold a major responsibility for producing quality teachers. These are providers of initial teacher programs mostly and also play a guiding role in initiating and providing professional development programs for practitioner teachers as well. Universities also provide a major source of research and development in the field of teacher education. This knowledge generated in universities can go a long way in solving everyday teaching practice problems.

The creation of knowledge sharing school networks which have been facilitated by universities is considered as the most vital source of improvement in quality of teacher education through practice based and

evidence based innovations. A key role played by universities is to assess impact of school innovations on student outcomes and to present successful practices by schools in generalizable form to larger populations. University academics is not considered for knowledge generation only these days but as facilitation of knowledge creation in cooperation with teaching practitioners as well (McLaughlin et al, 2004; 2006). Academic practitioners produce new research approaches, new research designs and action research based on the grey areas observed in school teaching. On the other hand, in developing countries schools are being sensitized and encouraged to develop capacities for systematic inquiry and professional reflection, to collect and utilize data for improvement of their practice and to support teachers' continuous professional development of their teachers using innovative research approaches such as mutual lesson observations, peer feedback, in-house research or adopting variations in lesson planning and study methods (Cheng-Lo, 2013; 2015).

Benefits and Challenges of partnerships for sustainable development

Baumfield and Butterworth, (2007) have described the process of school-university partnership as a process similar to osmosis. Enquiry promotes and drives exchange of learning and understanding across partners, as problems are posed, solutions sought out then expertise is applied through different people and places within such partnerships. Balance and equity in such relationships is maintained through set institutional missions, targets and quality indicators for teacher education and practice. Similar approaches are also being undertaken in business and health sectors as well.

Husbands, (2013) has suggested that the concept of school-university partnership solely depends on three conditions: firstly, inclusion of such partnerships as futuristic approach in the mission of educational institutions namely, schools, colleges and universities; secondly schools need to assess the targets set for new inductees as per their mission statements and then convey these targets to universities to incorporate them in teacher education programs to follow the rule of demand and supply; thirdly, and most importantly focussing on quality teacher preparation for sustainable development of teaching profession.

Major core of school- university partnership is a critical intersection of research and theory with practice and implementation. In countries where such partnerships have prevailed, the schools sought to identify newer strategies in leadership, instruction and student support whereas on the other hand universities had the capacity to identify novel approaches based on research and theory and evaluation of innovative teaching practices. The overarching

goal seems to develop a strong linkage between inquiry and action (Walsh et al, 2000).

More specifically, school–university partnerships are also formed around the confluence points of the three major domains of schools (i.e., educational leadership, curriculum and instruction, and students’ support) with the three functions of universities (i.e., research, teaching and service). By finding ways to link the functions of the university with the domains of school, partners are able to create mutually beneficial long term relationships. A smaller number of partnerships have formed to address governance and leadership in schools, with university faculty providing professional development and coaching to local principals and school leadership teams. These partnerships enhance the skill sets of practicing administrators and provide a “laboratory” for university faculty to observe the impact of various approaches to school leadership (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011; Fahey, 2011).

Major challenge in such partnerships is culture clash. Although the partnerships are built upon a mutuality and capacity to respond, but they require close scrutiny from different departments of both institutions. School culture may clash with the structure and pace of university setting. Conflicting situations may emerge as both partners negotiate upon the terms of joint research endeavours. For example, university researcher may want to explore the problem area which may not be of particular importance to the school management. The research may yield outcomes important to the educational community at large but of little interest to the local school. In parallel fashion, the school may have a question that is not of particular interest to university researchers, or that falls outside the expertise of faculty. Collaborative planning processes, initiated well in advance of implementation, can help facilitate the alignment of each partner's research questions and minimize frustration (Anyon & Fernandez, 2007).

Mutuality of the process for sustainable development

It is expected that if school university partnerships are developed genuinely, then teacher educators, school staff and student pre-service teachers would acquire shared learning to teach with specific focus on collaborative reflection. Furlong et al (1996) had described three typical ideal models for such kind of partnerships in United Kingdom. These were characterised as Higher Education Institution (HEI)-led model, separatist model and collaborative model. In HEI-led model, control of meetings and discussions remain with the university, in separatist model, schools have the complete authority to develop program which selects, prepares and employs teacher within that specific school. In this model university has minimal involvement

except to prepare teachers according to the demand of that specific school. Collaborative model suggests equal participation of both parties for the success of this joint venture. Smedley, 2001 advocated the need for teacher educators, school staff and pre-service teachers to work in collaborative environment that cements novel partnership ventures.

Partnerships for sustainable development can nurture only and if they are based on strategic cooperation. Joined up, coherent and strategically fit partnerships based on mutual institutional trust survive only. School principals require administrative support of both sides. Such supportive relationships help in building trust and confidence among both partners (Dunford, Hill, Parish & Sandals, 2013).

Competency of teacher educators achieved through partnerships

Stoll, (2012) argue that effective professional competence means connecting work based learning with external expertise held by universities but Sebba et al, (2012) insist that traditional approaches to professional development are based on best practices from an expert to less experienced in the field. Therefore, a major challenge is how to move towards a combined model of professional development. Fielding, (2005) coined a term “Joint Practice Development” (JPD) - a process of learning newer ways of working through collaboration, engagement and mutual trust that opens up broader venues of shared practices with others. Joint Practice Development is a collaborative process in which teacher educators, school staff and pre-service teachers can learn from each other’s experiences. This process may involve following key factors; Mutual development and interaction related to teaching practice; Recognising that each partner involved in the process has to offer something beneficial for professional learning; Collaborative enquiry and; Action research

Trent, (2012) suggested that self-perception of teacher educators about school – university partnership help in building mutual engagements. Collaborative enquiry builds a rationale about the gaps in teacher educators’ competence. Once the educators realize the lagging skill, they try to move toward professional development. School helps to provide a base for action research and it ultimately makes a foundation for self-development of teacher educators.

Administrative support is an essential element for helping the teacher educators enhance their competence. Administrative support is required not only to build capacity and commitment but to ensure sustainability and continuity in professional development of teacher educators. Sometimes the partnerships become volatile and vibrant, but through administrative support coherence and success is achieved.

Perceived expectations of pre-service teachers

School based practicum sites for pre-service teachers are an essential requirement of teacher education programs. Placement of pre-service teachers in local schools provides a chance for strong collaboration among schools and universities. When pre-service teachers are placed in schools for teaching practicum, the school gets additional human resource and the pre-service teacher gets a chance of experiential learning. Schools may provide a research based demand of skills and competency required and universities may provide the desired human resource (Adelman & Taylor, 2011).

Lawson, (2010); Mary & Sarah, (2013) have intimidated that student support is less addressed area of school university partnerships for ameliorating teacher education programs. A wide range of literature suggests that to support pre-service teachers effectively in their practicum, equal support and respect from schools as well as universities is required. A collaborative partnership helps in building strong practicum experiences among student teachers. Such partnerships are also required to be supported by observation, discussion, feedback, critical reflection and expert modelling which is possible only by integration of expertise of both the school and the university site. This study has the following objectives; to explore school principals' perceptions regarding benefits and challenges in school- university partnerships for sustainable development; to give a detailed account of this partnership on professional development of teacher educators and ; to discuss perceived expectations of pre-service teachers from school- university partnership on their professional practice.

Research Methodology

The study was descriptive qualitative in nature. Data was collected through small scale semi-structured interviews from school principals, teacher educators and pre-service teachers. The semi-structured interviews were based on major themes and the sub-codes. This technique is considered most reliable and justified for conducting mini qualitative research. Data thus obtained was treated further under thematic analysis to retrieve findings and to reach conclusions. Population of this study included 119 School Principals serving in Government Schools, Islamabad (Male & Female) , teacher educators (75) and pre-service teachers (237 in Final Semester) from Public Sector Universities, Islamabad. Random sampling technique was used and 50 school principals, 50 teacher educators and 50 pre-service teachers/ student teacher were selected as sample of the study. The researcher had to randomly select sample of the study due to time and resources constraint.

Research Instrument

Interview protocol was thoroughly followed to conduct semi-structured interviews from the respondents. This interview was developed by the researchers after intense study of the related literature on the given research problem under the following broader and sub-themes themes:

Themes	Broad Codes	Sub codes
Mutuality of the process for sustainable development	Benefits, challenges and mutual cooperation	Administrative cooperation
Competency of teachers and teacher educators	Continuous professional development	Mutual trust Administrative support
Perceived expectations of pre-service teachers on professional practice	School targets for new teachers	Self-perception of teacher educators Student support Teaching practicum

Data analysis technique

Creswell, (2009) has suggested that the best method for analysing semi-structured interviews is thematic analysis. Step by step approach of thematic analysis was followed by transcribing interviews, reading the data, generating themes and codes and lastly interpreting the meaning of the generated themes.

Results

Table 1: Interview results of respondents (School Principals)

Themes	Broad Codes	Sub codes	Frequencies	Percentage
Mutuality of the process for sustainable development	Benefits, challenges and mutual cooperation	Administrative cooperation	28	56%
		Mutual trust	22	44%

Table 2: Interview results of respondents (Teacher Educators)

Themes	Broad Codes	Sub codes	Frequencies	Percentage
Competency of Teachers & teacher educators	Continuous professional development	Administrative Support	27	54%
		Self-perception of teacher educators	23	46%

Table 3: Interview results of respondents (Pre-service teachers)

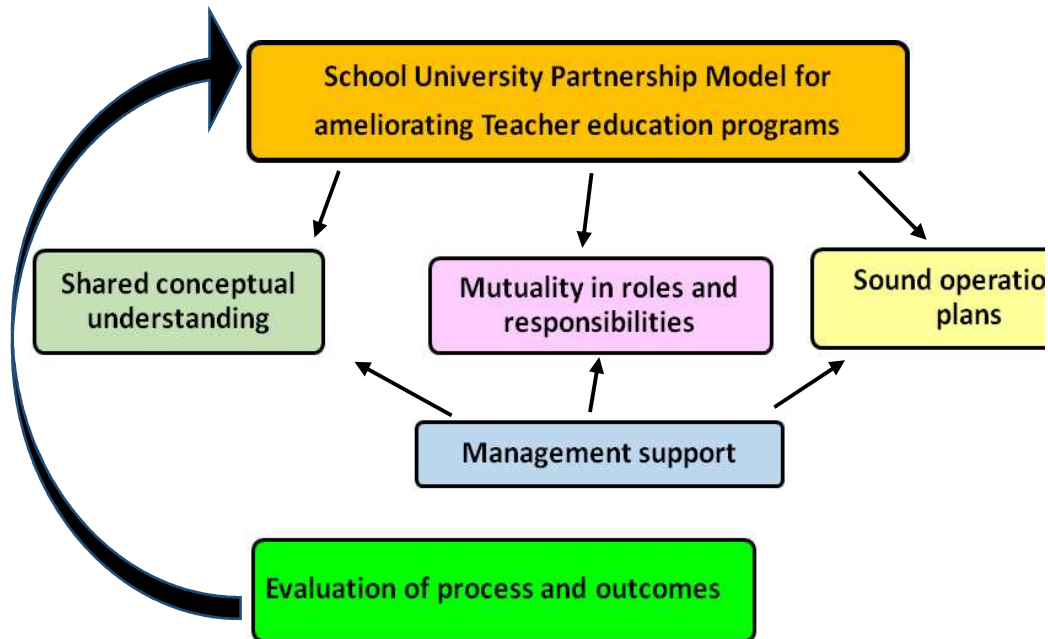
Themes	Broad Codes	Sub codes	Frequencies	Percentage
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Perceived expectations of pre-service teachers on professional practice	School targets for new teachers	Student support	27	54%
		Teaching practicum	23	46%

Findings and discussion

Findings of the study displayed as table 1, 2 & 3 are self-explanatory. School principals' views about benefits, challenges and mutual cooperation and trust showed that 56% respondents agreed to it that administrative support plays a vital role in such partnerships for sustainable development. However, 44% school principals' were of the view that mutual trust between schools and universities is the bonding force for partnership. 54% Teacher educators opined that administrative support is inevitable required for continuous professional development where as 46% agreed to it that firstly, teacher educator must have self-perception about his/her competence then such partnerships can flourish. 54% pre-service teachers agreed that the factor of student support has to be reconsidered by school administration whereas 46% pre-service teachers had perceived expectations that school and university will collaborately provide a strong platform for their teaching practice. These findings are in line with the researches carried out by (Trent, 2012; Mary & Sarah, 2013; Stoll, 2015 ;Baumfield & Butterworth, 2017)

Collaboration and communication between the academic world of universities and schools has never been straightforward and simple. Teaching practitioners and academics have been sometimes labelled as citizens of two separate worlds. But due to some commonalities, it is possible to enrich and ameliorate teacher education programs through the partnerships. A viable model for school university partnership may be as under:



Above mentioned model is self-explanatory and it defines that shared conceptual understanding about partnership drive, mutuality in roles and responsibilities of school and university participants and sound operational plans serve as key characteristics for school- university partnerships meant to enrich teacher education programs for sustainable development. Whereas continuous management support is mandatory to achieve this objective. Evaluation of the process and outcomes will serve the purpose of improvement for the next partnership systematically.

Concluding reflections: Bridging the two worlds for sustainable development

Great examples of school/community partnerships are happening all over the world. We need more of them, and we need to ensure they are healthy and relevant to the needs of 21st century learners. Despite major challenges that are present in establishing School University partnership for enriching teacher education programs, there are a lot of opportunities as well. At the heart of such partnerships, is the linkage of inquiry and action. Through such partnerships, a platform is provided to researchers to test research questions in real world contexts. Schools also benefit from universities as research ideas get transformed into testable interventions. Best practices in teacher education programs for sustainable development can be co-constructed through educational research and practice. Pre-service teachers are well trained by receiving enriched teaching practicum and professional preparation in partner

schools, whereas depth and level of university teaching is enhanced significantly as a result of the partnership. At a broader level, if such partnerships are extended, schools and universities can contribute positively towards achieving sustainable development goals through teacher education programs. At large, these partnership remind the participants of partnership that they are all members of the human community, charged with the mission of improving the lives of upcoming generations. Although the need of the society towards sustainable development is great, our collective capacity to respond is greater.

Recommendations

The level of partnership is unlikely to survive without ongoing commitment and research from the university; to provide mentors, guidelines and professionally developed teacher educators are mandatory elements of the process. It is recommended that:

- i. School- university partnerships for ameliorating teacher education programs may start as pilot projects and further extended to different geographic regions.
- ii. These partnerships may firstly focus on improving the quality of teaching practicum; secondly may provide guidelines and opportunities for teacher educators' continuous professional development through the gaps observed and thirdly may put an emphasis on action research for sustainable development through producing best quality teachers.
- iii. Educational administrators and managers serving in schools and universities may be trained to handle these collaborations without biases and prejudices.



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